

### Mobbed by Crows

This summer was a demoralizing one, from the standpoint of gardening. I can't really recall all of the reasons for this at this late date. After all, the amnesia that sets in following the end of garden season is the reason we attempt a garden again the following spring, isn't it? But I do have a somewhat hazy recollection of endless weeds, and a poor harvest. Just for the record, the harvest issues began well before the weeds took over, or at least I'd like to think so.

Here's how I remember it. Things were going along well enough, but I was somewhat lacking in ambition, so when the corn started to ripen I didn't really jump all over it. I know from previous years' experience that when your corn ripens it happens all at once, regardless of how carefully you stagger your plantings. If you just eat your way through it, you'll wind up eating some mighty tough corn. The wise gardener therefore starts putting her corn into the freezer well before that state of affairs develops.

But this summer, I did not really feel like gathering up all my corn and starting the processing. So we sort of moseyed our way along. Gradually, almost imperceptibly, that is when the trouble started. Something else was out there, enjoying our corn. At first it was only an ear or two, here or there, so I did not really mind. But I did wonder what was doing this. Raccoons rob you all in one night. We have a lot of skunk troubles, and I wondered if they would eat an ear a night.

Then one morning as I was headed out the door on my way to work, I caught sight of a rustling in my garden. Something was in the corn patch – you could see a stalk shaking, despite the lack of wind. I did a careful sneak, and there was the culprit. A crow was standing on the ground, pecking away at an ear. It looked so funny, I couldn't help but laugh. Probably it was my own fault, for having planted that short-season variety that also turned out to be short stature, with ears near the ground.

The laughter ended a few days later when there was no corn left. I told myself I didn't mind, as I had not really felt like getting that corn into the freezer. But then when all my tomatoes disappeared in about a day's time, I got fairly angry. I love tomatoes, and there always seems to be some reason why they don't end up in jars on my shelf... frost, hail, blight, my own sheep, and now crows. That seems a bit much! But it wasn't enough, and the crows next turned on my apples. Those we picked and got onto the screen porch. The only thing that consistently remained safe was the zucchini. Go figure.

It wasn't until I went down to the county fair that I saw one of my neighbors, and while swapping stories I learned that she and her niece had been feeding crows a can of cat food every day. I didn't ask her why. I don't know if that started my garden troubles or not, but this is the only year (so far) I have had such trouble with crows. It has started me to wondering about crows. I know crows are darn smart. How long do they live? Do they come back to the same place every year? Will I see these crows next summer? Will my troubles ever end? Should I just throw in the towel now and not even bother my husband to get out the tiller next year? And what about our friend we saw at the Talmoon corner store, who also had crow troubles this year. He

lives about 5 miles from me, as the crow flies. Are his the same badly behaved crows as those parked on my garden this summer?

I did a little reading up on crows. I knew I was in the right section when I saw the descriptions “cunning” and “inquisitive”. One of the most widespread of North American birds, this highly intelligent species occurs in at least part of all but 2 States, and has adapted well to the fragmented landscapes of modern America. Not a species that needs the relatively wild forests of places like the Chippewa National Forest, crows are also at home in villages and cities, and any manner of open lands. Millions of crows form night roosts in downtown Minneapolis, where they are not necessarily appreciated.

Crows are omnivores; they eat almost anything, including certain agricultural crops. They are very fond of corn, as I have recently learned. They primarily feed on the ground, but sometimes also in fruiting trees and shrubs. They have been noted to wade in shallow water up to their bellies to catch small fish. They are a predator of many birds’ nests, including early nesting ducks. Crows are known to use tools to gather food, and have been seen dropping some foods such as turtles and clams on hard surfaces to break them open. It is taken to another level when crows drop hard nuts on roads to allow passing cars to break them open, and then pick up the pieces. I find that to be amazing.

Crows have a wide variety of vocalizations, including mimicry of human voices, cats, dogs, and geese. A special “assembly call” is used to gather all crows within earshot to collectively “mob” a nearby predator such as an owl or hawk, and drive it away.

Crows are monogamous, forming pair bonds that last for years. They raise about 5 young per nest, and are sometimes aided by “helpers” who are generally their offspring from previous years. Long-lived, the oldest known wild crow was 14 years old. Mortality of young crows is high, with more than 50% dying in their first year of life; after that, the death rate rapidly reduces with age, probably because crows learn so much.

Crows maintain territories, many of which are occupied through the winter. Territory size varies tremendously with location. Adult crows generally remain faithful to breeding sites, returning to them in succeeding years.

In our part of Minnesota, crows migrate south in many winters, but in mild years may be seen throughout the winter. Crows generally migrate in flocks of 30 – 200 birds, but sometimes as many as 500 – 1000. One fall on the North Shore I witnessed dozens of crows moving along the shoreline of Lake Superior, barely above tree top level, no doubt in migration status.

Crows play. They play with objects, and they play in flight. They have been observed to fly hard against a stiff wind to a certain height, and then drop, tumbling through the air towards the ground, recovering in time to climb back up and do it again.

All in all, I like crows. They are incredibly smart; they have personality. They are survivors. The bad news is my badly behaved crows are likely to return, to continue their bad behavior. Further bad news is that my friend’s naughty crows are surely not the same crows that bother my garden.

Many people know there is a hunting season for crows in Minnesota, which includes the ripe corn month. The good news is, you don't have to shoot all the badly behaved crows. You can just shoot one, and leave it out as a warning for the others. Crows pick up on stuff like that.



I tried to take a picture of my first crow, before he called in all his buddies, on that morning last summer when I first discovered him at work in my garden. But crows are smart. He would not let me get his picture. Probably afraid I would use it to identify him in the future. So all I have is this sad picture of a spent and empty corn patch, after it filled up with the weeds. And I am beginning to wonder... just where were my farm cats when I really needed them? If crows can mimic cats, can they convince them to leave them alone while they ravage my corn patch? Oh, and by the way, here is the most interesting quote from the reading I did on crows: "It is a mistake to underestimate a crow's ability". If I were I you, I'd pay attention to that last part.

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